For the UNDERPRIVILEGED ESKIMO

Last of a Series by FARLEY MOWAT

What Can We Do?

Mr. Mowat is an author of vigor and dedication. He has made the cause of the Eskimo his cause. There are some, who know the North, who will not agree with him that the very survival of the Eskimo is threatened. But there are few who will not agree that much could be done to bring a greater happiness and better protective health measures to these people, and allow them opportunities for service and citizenship that for the majority have been lacking up to now.

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WHAT DO THE ESKIMOS REQUIRE if they are to escape from the physical and spiritual abyss into which we have plunged them.

First they must have much more help to repair the bodies which are wracked by tuberculosis and other endemic diseases, and which are weakened by chronic malnutrition.

They must be enabled to escape from the igloo, that death trap for infants and adults alike.

Only proper food, adequate clothing and housing and sufficient medical care can undo the ravages of the long years when the Innuit were an abandoned people.

The second thing that Inuk must have is access to and understanding of, the world beyond what I regard as the vast concentration camp in which we have kept him.

Only then can he decide what his future is to be, and only then can he find a future which does not end in dissolution for himself and for his people.

The third thing he requires is opportunity to prove himself an able partner with the rest of us: opportunity to work for a decent living; opportunity for him to take his place as a man of equal stature with any other man.

And the fourth thing he requires is freedom to speak for himself, to have a voice in his own destiny.

What will it cost to give him these things?

It will cost far less than to deny these things to men who have a right to them.

It will not require a very prolonged effoort on our part before the Eskimos are self-supporting and have become a living asset in our common country, rather than the liability to purse and conscience which they now are.

Are we giving him the things that he must have?

The answer is that, we are now trying, belatedly and not always effectually, but trying to right one of the most tragic injustices in our history.

There is a faint glimmering of dawn in the land of the long night. And the organization responsible for this glinting hope is a department of the federal government.

The department of northern affairs is largely staffed by men of personal ability, initiative and the capacity for vision.

It has in its employ a surprising number of people who are working for it primarily because they see it as the last hope for the Eskimos.

It is these dedicated men who are bringing the faint light of a new dawn into the north.

They are not having an easy time. Frustrated by outmoded official procedure; hand-cuffed by lack of funds; despised and feared by the representatives of the old "Empires of the Arctic," they can only move at a snail's pace.

Often they see their bright designs shattered before they can be translated into reality.

Sometimes their inexperience leads them to commit blunders which give substance to the accusations of their critics. They are not infallible, they are not always right.

Nevertheless they are getting something done.

Schools are going up across the Arctic as fast as funds, and qualified teachers, can be found.

A Roman-style alphabet is being prepared to help in freeing Inuk.

The dream is for a fully integrated educational system which will cater to Eskimos, Indians and children of European extraction alike—and which will have two doors: one leading in from the hard land of the north, and the other opening out into the whole of Canada, and into the world beyond. Realization of this dream is being contested by those old emperors of the Arctic who have always argued that there should be but one door in any school for Eskimos and Indians.

The department of health and welfare is also doing something for the Eskimos. It is doing something—but though TB may have been halted in its upward course, one out of every eight Eskimos still suffers from this disease.

Efforts are being made to help the Eskimo in some directions. Here, at Frobisher Bay, Baffin Island, at the rehabilitation centre, the clerk, Paulette Anerodluk, gives blocks of soapstone to carvers employed there who find a ready market for their work.

The average life expectancy of an Eskimo is still less than 29 years.

Two hundred and forty Eskimo babies of every thousand born, still die before their first year is out.

Most Eskimos still live in igloos or their equivalent, and most of them are still starving.

A handful only have escaped the twin horsemen of disease and hunger, but the vast majority are still dying on the land which can no longer feed, shelter or clothe them.

Plans exist for a full-scale assault upon the health problem, but they cannot be implemented without money and good men. There are too few men, and there is not enough money.

Despite the dogged efforts of the Eskimophiles in northern affairs, the results they have achieved are hardly more than tokens of what must be done.

Frobisher Bay, with its Eskimo shops and crafts demonstrates that the Eskimo does not need to be carried—he only needs a hand to help him up.

The rehabilitation centres at Churchill and Rankin Inlet have accomplished hopeful things for a handful of the Innuit—but for every Eskimo who is being helped by them there are nearly 100 who as yet receive no help.

The plans are there. The intention is there. But when the plans are translated into action they sometimes suffer grieviously from a lack of the support which only we as individuals can give.

While we display no interest in them; while we are content to believe the easy lie that the Eskimo is a happy savage, best left alone, the men who are struggling on his behalf are helpless.

The politicians upon whom these men must finally depend for physical support, will always listen to the loudest voice. If the public voice is silent, and if the only voices heard are those who wish to maintain the primitive condition of the Eskimo—then his agony will be prolonged.

At this moment the North is being touted as a place of glorious visions, of untold riches waiting to be taken. Yet, it is at the same time the place where a nightmare, more hideous than we care to realize, exists and flourishes.

We have a choice to make.

If we choose well the nightmare will be dissipated. If we do not choose well there will be generations yet unborn who will remember us with scorn and with contempt.

On an August day in the summer of 1958 I sat beside a woman on a pile of filthy rags in a sagging tent upon the Barren grounds.

Slowly, in a voice which betrayed no emotion, she told me of the days of the preceding winter when she had watched her husband and her small son starve to death before her eyes.

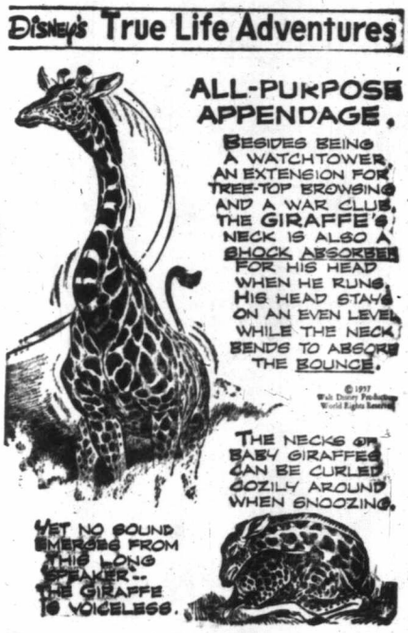
She did not ask for any sympathy, nor could I have given it to her, for she was the fifth person I had spoken to within a week who had told me of the starvation death that comes slowly into the igloos, and I had learned that my sympathy was as useless as regrets.

She told the story only because I asked her to, and when she was done she leaned forward and coughed so heavily that a little line of blood appeared upon her underlip.

There was silence for a time, then she handed me a cup of tea boiled in an old bacon can, and a piece of partly dried whitefish that the flies had already possessed.

With her story still echoing in my mind I turned to her and asked:

"But was there nothing that could have saved your husband and your child?"

This is her answer. Perhaps it is the truth. If it is truth, then we have made it so:

"What happened could not have been otherwise—for there was nothing to be done."